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SENSITIVE
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DEPARTMENT FOR OES (SENSENEY AND LAWRENCE), S/P (BEHRMAN),
S/SRMC (CHANDLER), AND R (NOOR-ALI); ALSO FOR NEA/MAG
NSC STAFF FOR SENIOR DIRECTOR RAMAMURTHY

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PREL](#) [SENV](#) [TSPL](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: SENIOR TUNISIANS ON SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
COOPERATION: NEA DAS WITTES'S VISIT

REF: A. TUNIS 43
[1](#)B. 09 TUNIS 757

Sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: In January 21 meetings with the Minister of Communications, the Minister of Higher Education, and a senior MFA official, NEA DAS Wittes underlined the USG's interest in stepping up bilateral collaboration on science and technology, previewing the prospective March visit of Science Envoy Elias Zerhouni and urging the GOT to ratify the bilateral Science and Technology (S&T) Agreement, signed in [1](#)2004. The Tunisians said they looked forward to Dr. Zerhouni's visit and said they would work to resolve a legal obstacle impeding ratification of the S&T agreement. End summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Upgrading bilateral cooperation in science and technology was a key feature of DAS Wittes' January 20-22 visit to Tunisia. In her three meetings with senior GOT officials, Minister of Communications Oussama Romdhani, Minister of Higher Education Bechir Tekkari, and MFA Secretary of State for Asia and the Americas Saïda Chtoui, DAS Wittes previewed the prospective March visit of Science Envoy Elias Zerhouni. Each welcomed the opportunity to enhance S&T cooperation and said they looked forward to the envoy's visit and would welcome his ideas and input.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Minister of Higher Education Tekkari said Tunisia had been modeled too closely on the French approach to S&T, and expressed interest in moving closer to a U.S. model in which the government funds research, the fruits of which are then adapted and applied by the private sector. Tunisia's strategy, he continued, is to move from its current low-to mid-range technology to building capacity for high technology especially in the areas of micro-electronics, informatics, biofuels, and biotechnology. Tekkari said the GOT recognized that a new approach would be needed to bridge the existing gap between research and industrial applications. Tekkari added that the GOT was developing a "Science City" intended to impart a new spirit of scientific entrepreneurship among Tunisian youth. DAS Wittes asked the Minister to forward her more information on the project so that Dr. Zerhouni could be briefed on it before his visit.

[1](#)4. (SBU) The Minister, DAS Wittes, and the Minister, Secretary of State for Science, Refaat Chaabouni, discussed the requisites for success in building a high-technology industry. Wittes expressed the view that, while education and job opportunities were important, equally key was the creation of a culture of innovation. The minister and his staff agreed. Wittes noted the role governments play in creating an environment that welcomes and rewards innovation.

15. (SBU) On the S&T agreement, DAS Wittes told MFA Secretary of State Chtoui that the U.S. was eager to activate the 2004 bilateral science and technology cooperation agreement and regretted that Tunisia had yet to ratify it. Providing, for the first time, a coherent explanation for the delay, Chtoui advised that the agreement had been flagged en route to parliament by Tunisia's Constitutional Council, which determined that one of the articles was incompatible with Tunisian law. She expressed the belief that the problem centered on a financial issue. DAS Wittes discouraged Chtoui's suggestion that it might be easier to negotiate a new, updated agreement. It would be much easier for the two sides to agree to amend a part of the text of the existing agreement, DAS Wittes explained. Pausing momentarily, Chtoui said she accepted that amending the existing text would be easier, and indicated the GOT would move forward on that basis.

16. (U) DAS Wittes has cleared on this message.
GRAY